

Designing for sustainability in cultural landscapes: The Kaya Kinondo Forest of the Mijikenda Community, Kenya

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ABSTRACT: Along the southern coast of Kenya, the sacred Kaya forests of the Mijikenda community are a living legacy of the people's history, culture and religion. In recent decades the Kaya forests have been shrinking in number and size. This research focuses on the traditional religious practices carried out among the Digo of the Mijikenda community. This investigation includes sacred natural sites, is limited to sacred forests and groves, and focuses particularly on how these practices have contributed to the conservation of the natural landscape.

The research relied heavily on interviews and observations. Data was collected by use of interview schedules, photographs and sketches. Graphs were used to present the collected data for better comparison and understanding, while tables were used to depict the data collected from the interviews.

The research established that traditional religious practices have greatly influenced the appearance of these sacred natural landscapes, enhancing their survival. It recommends development of an exhibition shrine in Kinondo to form part of the sacred Kaya Kinondo forest. This will ensure optimum input by all stakeholders under a coordinated program that realises a sustainable conservation agenda for traditional religious practices and the natural landscapes in which they take place.

Conference Theme: Cultural Landscapes

Keywords: traditional religion, sacred landscapes, natural landscapes, Kaya Kinondo Forest, cultural landscapes.

INTRODUCTION

Every 'people' has a culture, and culture is changing all the time, whether slowly or rapidly. Religion is integral to cultural heritage and it is by far the richest part of the African heritage (Mbiti, 1991). The Indigenous African religion, also called the 'African Traditional Religion' to distinguish it from other type of religions, underpins the cultural landscapes of Africa. The sacredness of places, having regard to this religion, is linked to natural objects and features such as trees, stones, water, mountains, caves, and other forms in the landscape.

According to the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (2005: 14), 'cultural landscapes' are cultural properties that represent the "combined works of nature and man" as designated in Article 1 of the *Convention*. These landscapes are illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities as presented by their natural environment and of successive social, economic, and cultural forces, both external and internal. It is in these cultural landscapes that a people's way of life, including religion, is conserved (Mbiti, 1991). Protection of these cultural landscapes can contribute to enhanced modern techniques for sustainable land-use practices and can maintain or enhance the natural values in these landscapes.

This paper examines the nature of the sacred in relation to cultural landscapes. It explores how landscape architecture serves to make manifest both physical and spiritual, the sacredness and mystery of a site and how these can aid in the conservation of cultural and natural heritage. It further explores the natural objects lying at the root of the forms and shapes employed to embellish a sacred site.

The research is based upon information drawn from a sample population from the Digo, a sub-tribe of Mijikenda Community, of Kwale District in Kenya. It seeks to assess their traditional religious practices and to ascertain how these practices have shaped the natural landscape that they reside within and curate. The sacred natural sites will be limited to sacred forests (the Kaya forests) and groves, focusing on the contribution the Digo have made towards their sustenance.

Objectives

- To establish the traditional religious practices associated with the Digo community in the sacred Kaya forests;
- To establish the natural landscape elements associated with the sacred Kaya forests;
- To establish the role traditional religious practices and natural landscape elements play in sustaining cultural landscapes.

Methodology

The study relied on interviews and observation. The approach sought to collect information from a sample drawn from the target population in regard to their traditional religious practices. Data was collected by use of interview schedules, photographs and maps.

Sampling

The study was descriptive in nature and used purposive sampling method. This was used for selection of the site and respondents. Kaya Kinondo Forest was chosen because it was open to the public and thus easily accessible. A sample size of 30 respondents was used as recommended by Kothari (1990) and Mugenda (1999).

1. THE KAYA FORESTS

Along the southern coast of Kenya, the sacred Kaya forests of the Mijikenda community possess a living legacy of these people's history, culture and religion (Mbiti, 1991). According to oral history, the Mijikenda began settling in the hills and plains of the Kenyan coast at least four centuries ago to escape the marauding tribes that had driven them from their former settlements. For centuries, these once-extensive lowland forests shielded homesteads, called "Kayas," of the Mijikenda, from invading tribes, providing burial grounds, and places of worship. The word 'Kaya' means 'home' in *Chidigo* language (Sharman, 1983). Cultural taboos prohibited the cutting and removal of trees and other forest vegetation for all but a few select purposes. Due to the forests' protected status, they became repositories of biodiversity, harbouring many rare species of flora and fauna.

Although the Mijikenda eventually moved out of their original settlements, the forests have continued to serve as ceremonial centres and burial grounds. In recent decades the sacred Kaya forests have been shrinking in number and size (Githitho, 2001). An expanding tourism industry, industrial demands for natural resources, and a growing population in need of settlement and farmland are claiming the Kaya forest land. Diminished respect for traditional values, spurred by poverty, has also taken a toll.

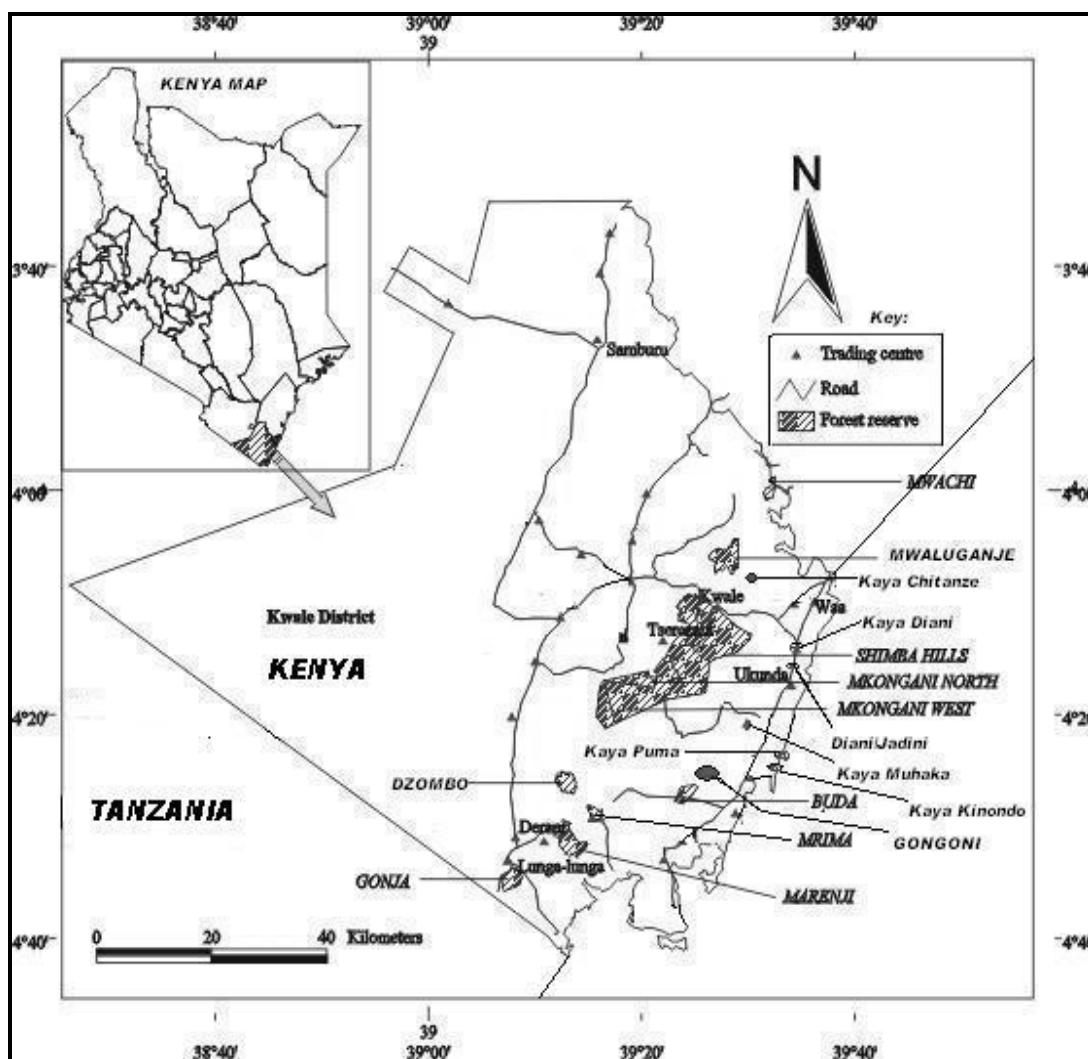
Other problems include development pressures from neighbouring communities who are in search of building materials and a high rate of urbanization which has led to illegal cutting of indigenous hardwood trees in the Kaya forests. Natural disasters such as forest fires have also led to massive destruction of the sacred forests. Lack of traditional, cultural and spiritual knowledge of the importance of the Kayas has also led to poor management of the forests.

The sacred Kaya forests were gazetted as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2005; this designation has strengthened protection of these forests (UNESCO, 2005). UNESCO helps countries to protect their World Heritage sites by providing technical assistance and professional training and supporting public awareness-building and conservation activities. They are also protected by a Kenyan Act of Parliament, the *National Museums and Heritage Act of 2006*, under which the Kaya Kinondo Forest has been gazetted.

1.1. Kaya Kinondo Forest

1.1.1. Location

The Kaya Kinondo Forest is located in south coast Kenya in Msambweni division of Kwale District at 0423°S and 3932°E (Fig. 1). It is a coral-rag forest situated approximately 7km south east of Kaya Muhaka. It lies nearly 5km on the road from Diani to Chale Island, and about 23km north east of the Shimba Hills. Also well known as Kaya Ngalaani, the Kaya Kinondo Forest is located only 100m from the Indian Ocean. The size of the Kaya is estimated to be 30 ha (Robertson & Luke, 1993).



Source: Author (2007)

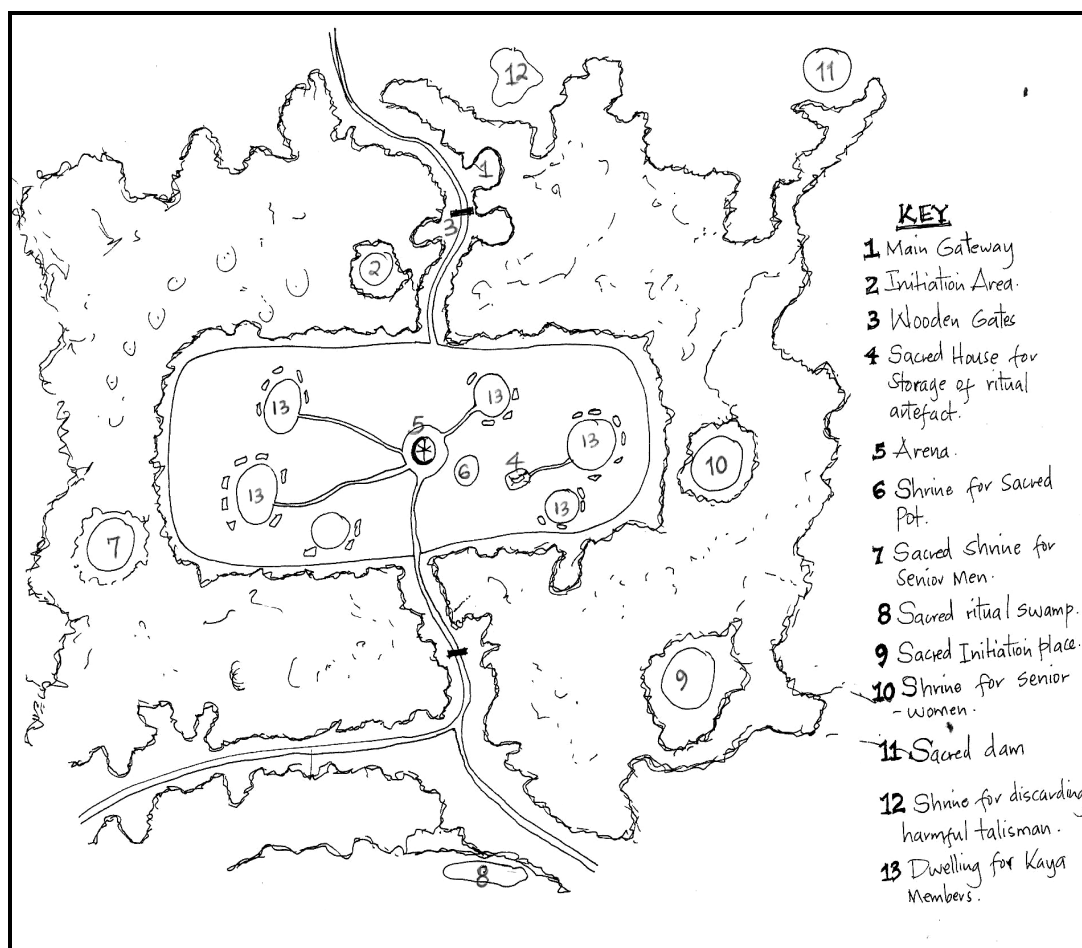
Figure 1: Kwale District and Location of Kaya Kinondo

1.1.2. Physical conditions

The sacred Kaya forest is botanically diverse and has a high conservation value, as determined by a number of surveys. Two surveys undertaken by the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), and funded by World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), established that more than half of Kenya's rare plants are found in the coastal region with the majority in Kaya Kinondo. The Kaya forest supports 19 small mammal species, 90% of which are specifically forest inhabitants (Clarke *et al.*, 2000).

It is believed that the forest was once under the sea. Remains of coral stones are evident and currently support growth of many plant species and hosts insects. These give the forest a unique character that would only be found along the coast. Additionally, the remains of the sea are evident in the form of a wetland which is characterised by a water pond and an ash mound. This is where cultural sacrifices had been taking place. It is currently used by the wild animals in the forest as a drinking point.

Four traditional paths, each associated with specific clans, are still identifiable. At each of the entrances through a shady grove is a worship hut believed to be for protection against unwanted spirits. The central core of the Kaya is the 'fingo', the most sacred part where a mythical object like a protective charm is buried and where nobody, save the priests are allowed to enter. This place is deep inside the forest, and a clearing surrounds it. This is where the community initially settled before moving to the outskirts of the forest (Fig. 2).



Source: Author (2007)

Figure 2: Layout of Kaya Kinondo Forest

1.1.3. Administrative and Institutional Framework

The Kaya Kinondo forest is one of the twenty-three gazetted Kayas and protected under the Kenyan *National Monuments and Heritage Act (NMHA) of 2006*. The NMHA establishes the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), a corporate body which manages the site by protecting natural and cultural heritage (GOK, 2006).

As the state agency responsible for the management of natural heritage, the National Museums of Kenya (NMK) created the Coastal Forest Conservation Unit (CFCU) in 1992 to collaborate with local communities in caring for the Kaya forests (Githitho, 2001). The CFCU, in partnership with local communities and with support from the World Wide Fund (WWF) for Nature and other non-governmental agencies, has implemented a multi-faceted conservation program. The CFCU has worked to map the Kaya forests, inventory their biological diversity, and document social and cultural information. It has also initiated programs to help farmers to establish small tree nurseries and bee-keeping operations in order to reduce tree logging in the forest.

Started in 2001, the Kaya Kinondo Ecotourism Project has guides who conduct tours of the Kaya forest, educating visitors about the forest's medicinal plants and the traditional practices of the community. Visitors follow a strict code of behaviour and certain areas are off-limits or excluded from photography. The collected entry fees aid schools established within the Kinondo area and other community projects.

In summary, the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) is concerned with ensuring that the wildlife in the Kaya Kinondo sacred forest area is not interfered with by locals or other people. It also imposes punishments on law-breakers.

1.1.4. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis

Strengths

The Kaya Kinondo Forest is an important cultural site; a unique landscape element acknowledged and declared a national monument by the government. It is a tourist destination endowed with a beautiful scenery rich in culture and biodiversity. The National Museums of Kenya (NMK) is the state authority responsible for the conservation and management of national heritage. Through it, the local community has established ways of conserving the forests (GOK, 2006). Self-help groups like the Kaya Kinondo Eco-Tourism Project has supported and lifted the livelihoods of the neighbouring communities by, for example, establishing a primary school. The forest has also created employment for the Indigenous Digo people through conservation plans that include tour guides hired by the CFCU. The entire program conserves traditional worship practices for future generations.

Weaknesses

The Kaya Kinondo Forest lacks adequate funding to support conservation efforts. Lack of adequate funding has led to set-backs such as inadequate qualified guides, and publicity to market the full potential of the sacred site. Another problem is the lack of adequate support facilities like information centres, accommodation facilities and catering services for visitors. There is also the fear of visiting the sacred site by Indigenous Digo future generations, leading to the slow deterioration of this Indigenous knowledge.

Opportunities

The forest could form an important tourist attraction in the coastal tourism circuit. It could be an important educational centre that could promote conservation of the important ways of life of the Indigenous people in the Kinondo area and its environs. It is also a potential site for show-casing Indigenous medical knowledge through displays of medicinal herbs and medicine men.

Threats

Increased population has led to an upsurge in the demand for additional land for cultivation and mining. This has also led to an increased need for forest products such as wood timber for construction as well as for fuel, resulting in destruction and loss of some parts of the Kaya forest.

Human disasters such as forest fire intended for clearance of cultivation land get out of control and burn larger areas. Sometimes forest fires are started by wild honey harvesters when smoking bees to obtain honey.

The decline of Indigenous knowledge on the conservation of the forest, due to inter-marriages of the Digos and other communities, and the introduction of Islam and Christianity, have attributed to the fact that the Indigenous knowledge is often held by a small group of elders. Therefore, a small number holds this knowledge. These changes have affected the cohesion and social values of the Indigenous community and hence respect for community social morals.

The tourism industry and the high rate of urbanization have increased demand for local heritage products. This has led to illegal cutting of indigenous hardwood in the Kaya forest, for example, *Brachyleana huillensis*, in order to make carvings for the hotels and tourist shops.

1.2. Findings

1.2.1. Traditional Worship Practices in Kinondo Area

All the traditional religious practices in Kinondo take place in the sacred Kaya Kinondo forest. The practices include:

- *Prayers for the sick and troubled:* these are held at the site of the 'fingo' by individuals, family members or the entire clan.
- *Prayers for rain and good harvest:* these are held in the 'kinyakan', an arena for rain prayers. During drought and famine, these prayers are believed to be helpful.
- *Prayers for wisdom and strength:* the Digo believe in the protection by ancestral spirits and thus carry out prayer sessions seeking guidance through hard times.
- *Atonement for offences against nature:* this is by offering special sacrifices. Depending on the magnitude of the offence, one is expected to bring a black fowl or goat which is then sacrificed to the 'spirits' by the community.
- *Rites of passage:* these include birth, adulthood initiations and marriage celebrations. Anointing new Kaya elders is reserved for the oldest men in the community and carried out in the most sacred areas within the forest.

Involvement in any of the above practices depends on its nature and intensity. For example, prayers for the sick, rain and good harvest, wisdom and strength call for everyone's presence while anointing of Kaya elders is strictly reserved for the old men. These practices have become part of the Digo's way of life.

1.2.2. Natural Landscape Elements in Kinondo Area

The residents were asked to identify the natural landscape elements within Kinondo area. The two major landscape elements rated in terms of preference were the sacred Kaya Kinondo Forest and the Indian Ocean shoreline. On probing further, 92% acknowledged their preference for the forest mainly due to its natural-ness and sacred nature while 8% identified the beach as their preferred natural landscape because it gives them good scenery for enjoyment and fishing.

The sacred forest is important to people of Kinondo because it hosts the following landscape elements believed to be dwelling places for the ancestral spirits through whom prayers and other sacrifices are made. Their existence ensures a link to the ancestors. Despite their importance, there are some areas that are prohibited. For instance, only the Kaya elders are allowed in places of sacrifice. Below is a summary of these landscape elements:

- Site of the '*fingo*' , a protective charm which is believed to protect the community from evil;
- The '*moro*' , a clearing within the forest and which serves as a meeting place;
- The burial ground ('*vigango*'), a secluded erected shrine curving in honour of the dead;
- Places of sacrifice characterised by a mound on which burnt offerings were offered (it is an altar symbolising the importance of the gods);
- A good fresh water pond which was used in the past by the Digo for domestic purposes. Presently, the fresh water pond is used by wild animals living in the forest;
- Natural paths which are used to access the sacred sites. Each natural path was named after an important person. One could only enter through the path belonging to his/her own clan. In order to avoid disturbing the 'sleeping forest spirits', only a single file is permitted.

1.2.3. Functions of Kaya Kinondo Forest

All the respondents affirmed that they were aware of the sacred forest. When asked for what function and how frequent they visited the forest, only 4% of the respondents visited it on a daily basis. The reason the 4% cited was that the forest helped them to relax after a long hard day. 12% visited the Forest weekly for individual thanksgiving prayers and to seek divine guidance. This was because the residents considered the Forest to be a place of worship thus requiring their presence once in a week.

Another 20% visited the Forest at least once a month. The various reasons given were sourcing for herbal medicine, surveying the forest for ravages, and to seek divine guidance among others. 40% of the respondents visited the forest annually, during rites of passage celebrations.

Despite awareness of the presence and existence of the sacred forest, 30% of the respondents admitted that they had never been to the forest. When asked why, they stated that it was due to the 'fear of the sacred forest'. Majority of this 30% were women and children.

The Digo people of Kinondo area have varied reasons in visiting the sacred Kaya forest. Even for those who do not or have never visited, it has always provided them with 'protection' by keeping away bad omens, including people with bad motives. In *Chidigo* language, the word 'Kaya' means home; hence people regard them as their original homes (Sharman, 1983).

1.3. Significance of Traditional Worship Practices

1.3.1. Relationship between Traditional Worship Practices and Natural Landscapes

The traditional religious practices of the Digo people have greatly been influenced by the appearance of the natural landscapes. For example, the '*moro*', which is a meeting place, is a clearing deep in the forest and large enough to accommodate the crowds. Kaya Elders choose areas surrounded by thick bushes in order carry out their sacrifices. During processions into the forest, a single file is made. This is to ensure minimal interference with the natural landscape and to avoid disturbing the sleeping spirits of the ancestors.

1.3.2. Importance of Natural Landscape Elements in the Past

The Digo people built their homesteads in clearings within thick belts of forest in order to protect themselves from neighbouring communities. The entire community lived within the central clearing, which was accessible only by a few guarded paths. A protective talisman called a '*fingo*', which represented the community's identity and history, was buried at a secret spot within the Kaya clearing. Burial sites were located within the surrounding forest, and shrines often honoured the graves of great leaders. Ancient trees and other unique landforms were also important. These sacred sites were formed by the natural landscape. People took advantage of the diverse landscape formations and made them into their homes and for areas of performing their sacred rituals. Cliffs were used by fishermen whenever they wanted to hold prayers and offer sacrifices for a good catch. Sacred ritual swamps were frequented by Kaya elders and medicine men for spiritual consultations with the ancestors.

1.3.3. Protection of the Landscape Elements

In order to protect these sacred sites, taboos enforced by the Kaya elders regulated activities that could damage the Kaya forests and sacred places. Cutting of trees, grazing livestock, and collecting or removing other forest material without elders' authority was strictly forbidden. Villagers used traditional paths to avoid disturbing vegetation and sacred areas. The only permitted activities were collection of medicinal plants and the use of forest materials to build ritual structures and homes. A code of behaviour, emphasizing decorum, respect and self-restraint, also protected the Forest. Those who broke the rules typically paid a fowl fine that was then sacrificed to placate the offended spirit. Illnesses and other community misfortunes often were attributed to an unconfessed offense.

1.3.4. Importance of Landscape Elements Today

Presently, the Digo community use the Kaya Kinondo Forest to commune with their ancestral spirits through worship and sacrificial offerings, though they no longer live inside the Forest. All the natural landscape elements of a Digo village, such as the site of the '*fingo*' (protective charm), the '*moro*' (meeting place), the burial ground, places of sacrifice, a freshwater pond, gates and paths, are present in the Kaya Forest. Prayers for the sick and

troubled, for rain and good harvests, for wisdom and strength, atonement for offences against nature, rites of passage and other rituals are occasionally undertaken in the sacred Kaya Forest.

1.4. Recommendations

1.4.1. Sacred Natural Sites

The sacred Kaya Forests are natural sites that have been conserved since time immemorial. The traditional religious practices of the Indigenous communities have enhanced the use of the natural landscape elements that constitute the Forests. However, over the years, conservation of these Forests has faced several problems.

The following recommendations and practices can be adapted to enhance conservation of the sacred Kaya Forests:

- *Cultural Activities, Institutional Development and Capacity Building*

Consultations with Kaya elders should be made more often in order to tap Indigenous knowledge. These consultations include a review of each committee's (discussed in 1.1.3 above) organizational structure including democracy, transparency and accountability.

Cultural activities should continue taking place in the Kayas. This will continue creating awareness of these practices of the Digo community and hence promote conservation.

- *Environmental Education and Awareness Programmes*

The main objective is to increase public awareness, particularly for the part of the youth, on the importance of conserving the Kayas. It is also intended to generate a wider interest in the history, customs and traditions that have resulted in the protection and conservation of Kayas to the present day. This can be effected through public participation, for example through eco-tours, and more funding through NMK.

- *Initiating Indigenous Tree Nurseries and Herbariums*

More inventories of the floral and faunal composition of the forest patches should be constantly carried out. Botanical work generates and updates flora and fauna species for each forest patch and involves specimen collection, preservation, identification and documentation. Duplicate specimens will then be sent to the existing and new herbaria. This will ensure growth of indigenous tree species and knowledge that can be passed for future reference.

1.4.2. Practical Implications

Traditional religious activities affect the organization of space. The layout shown in section 1.1.2. shows a typical layout of the Kaya Forest. It shows entrances, paths, ceremonial areas, and homestead clearing. This can be maintained with the aim of conserving the sacred Kaya Forests along the coast of Mombasa.

CONCLUSION

The Kaya Kinondo Forest is conserved and continues to be used as a ceremonial site, burial ground and place of prayer, as well as a source for medicinal plants. This has been attributed to the fact that traditional religious practices are directly linked to the natural landscapes. The Digo people build their homesteads in clearings within thick belts of this Forest. Burial sites are still located within the surrounding forest, including shrines that honour the graves of great leaders. Ancient trees and other unique landforms also hold ritual importance.

The conservation of these sacred Kaya Forests is imperative. Therefore, it is of importance to ensure optimum input by all stakeholders under a co-ordinated exercise that realises a sustainable conservation program for traditional religious practices and the natural landscapes in which they take place. Further studies should also be undertaken in other Kayas and associated cultural landscapes so as to ensure continued protection of the same.

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